

Cutting it Close by **Luddleston**

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Summary:

"A change in appearance," Patroclus had said when he first presented Zagreus with the request. "Something to keep things fresh after all these centuries of afterlife."

Zagreus gives Patroclus a hand in changing up his look, and discovers that it is indeed possible for this man to be even more beautiful.

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Author's Note:

- For [miraculan](#).

Inspired by [this beautiful art](#) by @miraculan!

Because seriously how could you not smooch this man.

"A change in appearance," Patroclus had said when he first presented Zagreus with the request. "Something to keep things fresh after all these centuries of afterlife."

Zagreus understood, after all, he had undergone his own change in appearance. He'd begun wearing his hair longer a few decades back, a bit more length than Thanatos usually liked. He used to chop it short because when it had any amount of length, the ends curled and he looked incrementally more like his father, but he'd outgrown his distaste for that family resemblance as of late.

"I'm surprised you'd rather not do this yourself," Zagreus said, kneeling before Patroclus on the bench beside the wide, open window at the back of his and Achilles' home. It was a little chamber for relaxation situated by the bathroom itself, where the two of them often lounged as they went about the rather laborious process of caring for their hair. The cool air of Elysium flowed in through the window, stirring up sparks on Zagreus' laurel.

Or else, the leaves were just popping due to the hammer of emotion in his chest. Sitting this close to Patroclus always made him a tiny bit anxious and overwhelmed by how much he cared.

"It has been so many years, I scarcely know how anymore," Patroclus said. There was a little bit of a tease in it, as if he was aware this was a very thin excuse to get Zagreus to pamper him. "You, on the other hand, have never kept a beard even though you are capable of growing one, unlike our Achilles."

Zagreus nodded. That was one way in which he still refused to resemble his father. "I know what I'm doing," he confirmed, although this was not something he'd ever done as a favor to somebody else.

"Above all, I trust you with a blade." Patroclus' eyes were warm and his smile lazy, and Zagreus took a long moment to break that eye contact before looking over the task he was meant to carry out.

"You already look so different even with it trimmed shorter," he said. Patroclus had carried this out beforehand, and now the shape of his chin and jaw was clearer than usual. Zagreus was reminded of when Patroclus was first reunited with Achilles, and actually took the time to properly groom himself. He'd looked nice before, in a rugged sort of way, but when his beard was trimmed evenly and his hair combed, he was handsome enough to stun any passerby princes.

"Not enough of a change for me," Patroclus said. "Besides, I dislike the way stubble prickles. I prefer a clean shave or a full beard, the interim is irritating."

"I suppose it would be." Zagreus' agreement was little more than a way to fill space as his fingertips finally brushed Patroclus' jaw, tipping his face this way and that to observe him. Some men wore beards to disguise a jawline that they didn't like, whether it was too feminine for their tastes or too narrow to suit the rest of their face. Patroclus, it seemed, had none of this to concern himself with. He would see for certain once Pat's face was bare.

Zagreus smoothed some of the perfumed oil Patroclus had laid out over his fingers and combed it through what remained of Pat's short-cropped beard. Patroclus had done an uneven job of trimming it, and he was right about it being prickly, especially when Zagreus ran his fingers against the grain. He kept on for a little longer than was actually needed to moisturize Patroclus' skin, luxuriating in touching his face for a while.

Patroclus' eyes were hooded but still open, watching Zagreus like a contented cat, blinking at him slowly. Their affection for one another no longer went unspoken—but *spoken* was about all that it was. They had not

yet acted upon it, although it had been some time. Years, probably. Patroclus teased that of course a god and a ghost would move slowly when it came to matters of lovemaking. Zagreus was just happy he was not irritated with him for taking his time with things.

He had to be relatively quiet when he took the blade to Patroclus' skin, too concentrated on his task for any banter. He started at Patroclus' jaw, considering this the safest place to begin. It wasn't too near his lips, or his throat, both of which Zagreus would need to reach eventually. It was strange to do this when he couldn't feel for himself how firmly he was pressing, and his first few strokes were too light, leaving behind stubble.

"So intense," Patroclus said, his lips barely moving as he spoke, his jaw kept still so Zagreus wouldn't nick him. "Your eyes, that is."

"I'm focusing." He only spoke when he dropped the blade to wipe it on the cloth that sat beside them, leaving dark hairs speckled across its white surface. "I wouldn't want to cut you."

"I'm sure I would be fine."

Patroclus kept still for him, however, allowing Zagreus to return to his work. The one difficulty was when Zagreus neared his lips and Patroclus kept smiling at him, or maybe it was more of a smirk, a teasing response to the way Zagreus colored when he thought of Patroclus' mouth.

Even when he did resume a neutral expression, Patroclus was a distraction and a half, his soft breath against Zagreus' hands enough to make Zag itch to touch him. It wouldn't be the first Zagreus had ever touched him, not even the first time Zagreus touched him gently, but he'd never pressed his fingers to Patroclus' lips before. Never kissed him, excepting playful pecks to his cheek and his forehead.

Zagreus found himself leaning close enough that his own breath must have been tangible against Patroclus' cheek. It wasn't a necessary closeness, his vision perfectly adequate even if he leaned away, but his desire to be close overrode such practicalities.

It got easier the longer he went on, and by the time he reached Patroclus' neck, he was comfortable making conversation again. By the time he had mostly finished and was just going over spots he might've missed, he was downright chattering, gently tipping Patroclus' chin with his left hand while his right held the blade.

"You know..." With his thumb and forefinger, he urged Patroclus to lean his head back just a little. "A fashion among warriors, these days—to crop their hair and their beards. The idea, as I understand it, is to give your opponent nothing to drag you closer by." He himself had been scolded for keeping his hair long, although he'd still won that particular sparring match.

Patroclus smiled just a little, actually trying not to emote and upset Zagreus' progress. "I am far too vain to part with my hair, I think," he told Zagreus. Quite right—Patroclus' hair had gotten even longer in the past few centuries, and as far as Zag knew, a shade couldn't change their appearance beyond how they looked in life, which meant that at some point in his life Pat must have had curls down to his thighs. Achilles, too.

"I'm surprised you are not too vain to part with the beard," Zagreus said, although that would be much simpler to grow back. "The fighter who started such a trend," he continued, "he's been using Achilles' name, on occasion. And his compatriot is using yours, if you can believe."

Patroclus always liked the mortals' gossip. He gave a little hum as he considered Zagreus' tale. "Flattering, I suppose, if not foolish," he said. "Not very subtle, either."

Zagreus laughed, taking the blade away from Patroclus' face, but leaving his hand, his thumb stroking Pat's chin. "Even less subtle than the two of you, as a matter of fact..."

He trailed off because he was distracted observing Patroclus' face. He had not been expecting Pat to look worse without a beard, especially not after he had seen him with it trimmed shorter, but he had also not expected Patroclus to look *better* clean-shaven, lovely and fresh, the shape of his lips more prominent without a beard and mustache to contend with. His jawline

was sharp, masculine, but his throat was elegant. When he smiled, he had dimples that had been hiding under there.

Patroclus drew his attention back with a flick of his eyes to Zagreus' mouth and then back up to meet his gaze. "More or less subtle than you now, would you say?" he asked.

Zagreus startled, his eyes going wide, lips pressing together. His laurel gave off a few more sparks than normal. One of the leaves floated down and brushed Patroclus' nose on the way, making it twitch. Zagreus' hand dropped back to his lap. "I... I couldn't say, really," he said. "Subtlety isn't really my strong suit."

"Mm. I'm sure you also weren't expecting such a handsome devil under all that scruff," Patroclus joked.

"You are indeed very handsome under there," Zagreus said, setting aside the blade. "But my truest appreciation was for the moments I got to touch your face, especially..." he brushed his fingertips of both hands along Patroclus' jaw, starting just below his ears and stopping when his thumbs met over Patroclus' chin. "Especially now that you're so soft."

Patroclus' mouth dropped open just a touch, a sweet look of surprise on his face. "Oh... my dear prince, I would never press you, but you can't simply go saying things like that to a man." He was still speaking quietly, making sure Zagreus' hands on his chin weren't disturbed, and his lashes fluttered closed as he added, "certainly not without giving him a kiss."

Patroclus quite clearly wasn't going to make the first move, and the thought of that, of this man Zagreus knew as a legendary warrior, tall and broad and powerful, preening beneath his fingers and closing his eyes to await kisses, made Zagreus' heart leap.

He leaned in, giving Patroclus the barest brush of a kiss. He could feel Patroclus' breath again, against his mouth this time instead of his fingertips, and it prompted another kiss, slightly longer, but still not enough pressure to disturb the gentle contact of Zagreus' fingers on Patroclus' jaw.

Patroclus tipped his head to the side, letting Zagreus in closer, his nose pressing against Zagreus' cheek. Zag's hands slipped around his shoulders, and Patroclus held onto his waist, keeping him steady. The kiss deepened steadily, firmer pressure and just a slip of his tongue over Pat's lower lip, but he pulled back before it could become anything more, kissing the corner of Patroclus' smile, the dimples he'd just uncovered, the smooth curve of his jaw.

Patroclus leaned his head back just as he had when Zagreus took the razor to his neck, letting him bestow kisses there, too. Zagreus' nose was full of the scent of the oil he'd used to soften Pat's skin—it smelled of asphodel blossoms, sweet and fresh. He smoothed his hands over Patroclus' hair, until he reached the ties that were holding it back, and then returned to the base of his neck and brushed over it again.

"You're wonderful, thank you," Patroclus said. Zagreus could feel the hum of his vocal cords beneath his lips. "I scarcely know what to do with myself when you treat me so gently."

"One would think you would be accustomed to this sort of tenderness, at least from Achilles," Zagreus murmured against the underside of his jaw.

"I scarcely know what to do with myself when it's him, either," Patroclus admitted. He leaned back, then ducked his head to catch Zagreus' mouth again, more warm, soft pressure that was going to quickly leave Zagreus breathless.

They separated just long enough for Patroclus to pull Zagreus into his lap, scooping him up with ease and putting an arm around his back to keep him close. Zagreus sat with his legs over the side of Pat's lap, his feet twisting together and setting off little sparks as Patroclus continued to lay slow, gentle kisses over Zagreus' lips.

"You know you entirely deserve to be treated with gentleness," Zagreus said, his fingertips tracing the dip of Pat's collarbone.

"Oh, hush," he demurred.

"It's true." He laid the flat of his palm against Patroclus' middle, just below his ribcage, where there laid the scar of the wound that had likely landed him down here. It was one of many scars Patroclus wore—most shades in Tartarus or Asphodel didn't like to show theirs, it was only in Elysium that battle wounds were prized. Patroclus had once told him that it didn't ache anymore, it was simply decoration.

"I was hardly more than a particularly belligerent piece of scenery when you first ran across me," Patroclus said. "I hardly deserved your attention, let alone your affection. Now, of course, I have bettered myself, but I always wonder how I didn't make such a poor first impression on you that you avoided me henceforth."

It was very hard to picture the Patroclus who was currently allowing Zagreus to rest in his arms as 'a particularly belligerent piece of scenery'. "Sharp though your tongue may have been, you were kind to me," Zagreus said. "I come across plenty of shades. Most don't even speak to me, much less offer me something to make my journey a bit lighter. Plus, you were immensely intriguing to me."

"Intriguing," he repeated. Now that he had no facial hair to hide behind, it was easier to see when a smile he tried to hide pulled at his lips. "I suppose you were intriguing to me, too. A stranger."

"Not quite so strange anymore," Zagreus said.

"No," Patroclus agreed, "not very strange at all."